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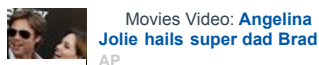
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"Cats and Dogs" sequel a charmless tale



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By Kirk Honeycutt - Sun Jul 25, 8:26 pm ET



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LOS ANGELES (Hollywood Reporter) - Although critter movies have performed extremely well at the box office, "Cats and Dogs: The Revenge of Kitty Galore" will put that trend to a tough test when it opens on Friday.

This isn't so much that the story and characters are weak -- though they very much are -- but that animatronics and computer animation so anthropomorphize these critters that they bear more resemblance to cartoons than actual flesh-and-fur animals. When cats and dogs, not to mention a bird and a mouse, don't act like animals, those story and character weaknesses really stand out.

Which is not to say young audiences won't embrace these critters too. CGI is so accepted now in video games and movies that these "Cats and Dogs" may look goofy rather than grotesque. Let's just hope no youngster returns home and flings the family feline across the lawn to see if she can fly like Kitty Galore.

The movie begins with a perfectly actionable premise: It's "Spy Kids" with critters. The opening-title sequence, easily the best thing in the movie, deliciously mimics those in James Bond movies. Then, true to form -- for early Bond films at least -- there's an MI-6-like organization called DOGS, determined to keep the world safe for only one kind of pet, and an elite spy organization called MEOWS, which challenges that assumption.

But where is the Bond character? What you get for a protagonist, or at least the four-legged character with the most screen time, is a failed police dog, a German Shepherd named Diggs (voiced by James Marsden). Only in human movie terms, he's more like Inspector Clouseau.

Then, more than a dozen critter characters flood the screen. There's a blunt Anatolian Shepherd Butch (Nick Nolte), a serious-minded Beagle Lou (Neil Patrick Harris), a Chinese Crested called Peek (Joe Pantoliano) -- mimicking Q from the Bond films -- and a shaggy Sheepdog Sam (Michael Clarke Duncan).

The villain (Bette Midler) is a MEOWS agent gone rogue, the Kitty of the title, a hairless cat that didn't start off life without fur and because of that means to get her revenge. The cat heroine is Catherine (Christina Applegate gets a Katharine Hepburn tinge into her voice). Mr. Tinkles (Sean Hayes) appears mostly for a Hannibal Lecter parody as he is trussed up in his prison cell. And Roger Moore plays a tuxedo cat named Tad Lazenby, a dig to the ribs of any adult who has not fallen into slumber by then.

There are many more furry things but you get the idea: It's a critter movie gone mad with gravity-defying animals, all sorts of gizmos and not doubt a few stunts that didn't require CGI -- but who can tell which ones? For every gag that works -- a cat mixing up his pet mouse and computer mouse -- many, many more fail.

Canadian director Brad Peyton has his hands so full juggling animals, humans and technology that he can never make any sense of an overly complicated, gimmicky screenplay by Ron J. Friedman and Steve Bencich, created in part as a sequel to the 2001 comedy "Cats & Dogs."

What the film lacks most of all is charm. You want to love the animals in a critter movie, to feel emotionally tied to them and not just root for creatures in a martial-arts dust-up. You yearn for a cat to stretch itself or

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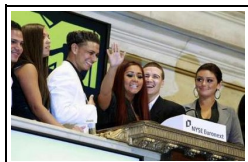
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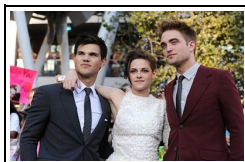
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